



The GHOST of the MOUNTAINS

Sujatha Padmanabhan

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by
Sujatha Padmanabhan

Illustrated and designed by
Madhuvanti Anantharajan

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2008

Published by Kalpavriksh and Snow Leopard Conservancy – India Trust

Kalpavriksh:

Pune: 5, Shree Datta Krupa, 908 Deccan Gymkhana, Pune 411 004, India. Tel: +91-20-25654239.

Delhi: 134, Tower 10, Supreme Enclave, Mayur Vihar Phase I, Delhi 110 091, India. Tel: +91-11-22753714.

Website: www.kalpavriksh.org

Snow Leopard Conservancy - India Trust:

Shangara House, Tukcha Main, Leh, Ladakh 194 101. Tel: 01982 250953

Website: www.snowleopardindia.org

Printed at:

Mudra, 383, Narayan Peth, Pune 411 030.

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*For Appa and Amma,
with much love and gratitude, now and always.*

Acknowledgements

The inspiration to write this story came from Rigzin Tundup who worked on our Snow Leopard Conservation Education Programme in 2006. Rigzin, a Ladakhi youth, is currently doing an engineering course in Leh. Rigzin saved the life of a snow leopard in 2007.

The production of this book was made possible by generous donations received from Varija Films Pvt Ltd, Anne-Marie Bugette, Harpreet Dhillon, Pratibha Pande, Seema Bhatt, Vibha Kale, Nileem Shankar, Deepak Sathe and Gayatri Degvekar.

I would like to thank:

- my sister, Vasundara Bhalla, not only for her invaluable editorial help, but also for being a constant source of encouragement.
- all my family members, who in many unspoken ways, have enriched my life.
- Madhuvanti, who luckily moved to Pune to add colour to our work.
- my friends in Ladakh, especially Achey-ley, Yangchen and Stanzin, who were just like family to me during my time up in the mountains.
- my colleagues and friends at Kalpavriksh, especially Sharmila Deo who was associated with this programme.
- Rinchen Wangchuk, the Director of Snow Leopard Conservancy – India Trust, whose unstinting appreciation of the first draft of the story was a major impetus for me to carry on.
- Angmo, Rigzin, Rinchen, Namgyal, Jigmet, Tashi and Lazes, my colleagues and friends at Snow Leopard Conservancy – India Trust, who have that special knack of looking after us “down *ke log*” in a way that makes us want to go back again and again.
- And last, but in no way the least, the children of Ladakh, whose enthusiasm and simplicity I will always remember.

- Sujatha



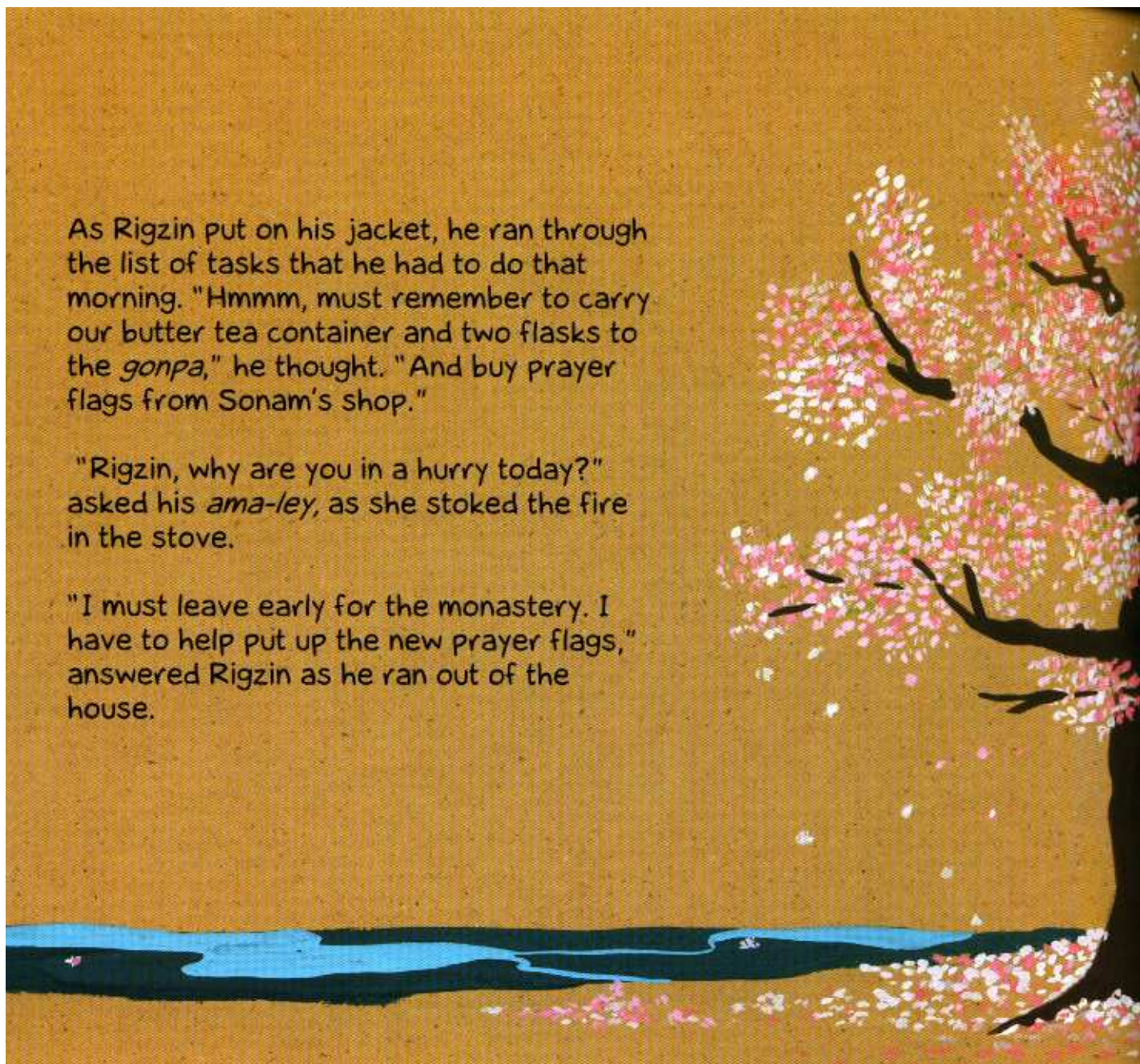
This is a story based on a real life incident that happened early one morning in a small Ladakhi village by the name of Ang. It was the morning of Buddhapurnima, a day of great religious significance for the Buddhists of Ladakh. That night the moon would shine in its full glory. Sixteen-year-old Rigzin had woken up earlier than usual. He had promised to help in the preparations for the special prayers that were to be held late that night in the village monastery. After gulping down a steaming hot cup of tea that his mother had made, he picked up his towel to have a wash in the stream that flowed by near his house.

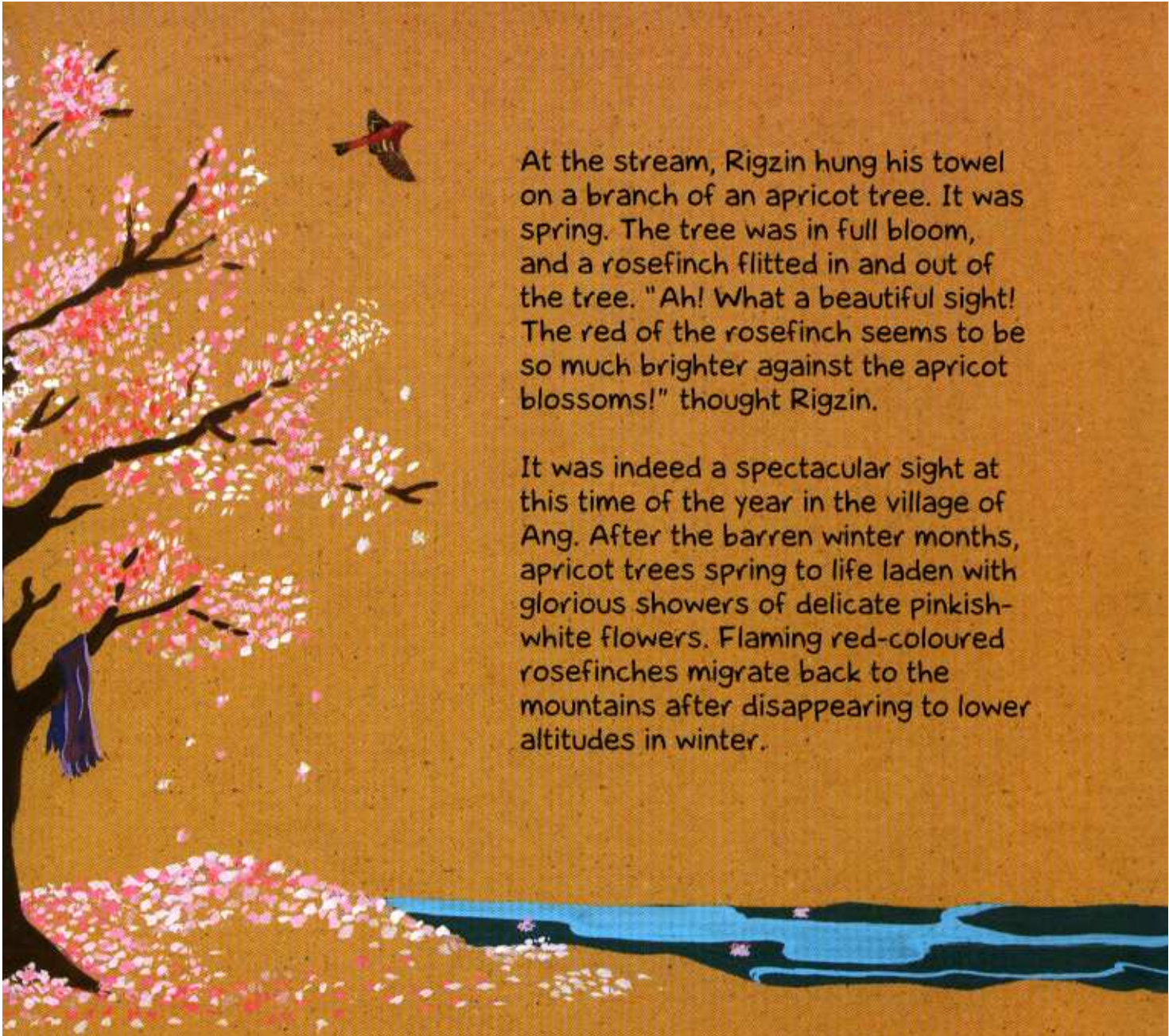


As Rigzin put on his jacket, he ran through the list of tasks that he had to do that morning. "Hmmm, must remember to carry our butter tea container and two flasks to the *gonpa*," he thought. "And buy prayer flags from Sonam's shop."

"Rigzin, why are you in a hurry today?" asked his *ama-ey*, as she stoked the fire in the stove.

"I must leave early for the monastery. I have to help put up the new prayer flags," answered Rigzin as he ran out of the house.

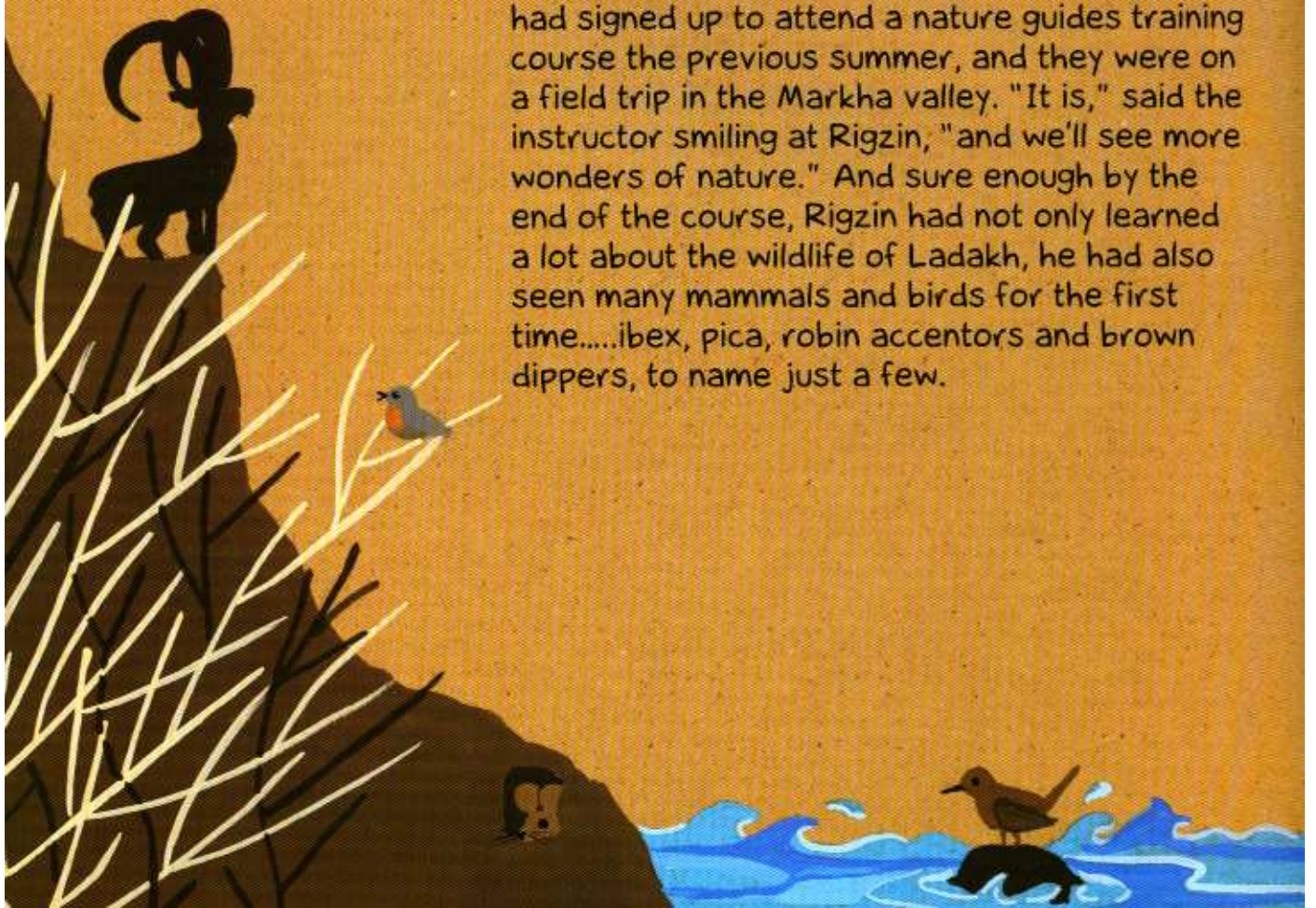




At the stream, Rigzin hung his towel on a branch of an apricot tree. It was spring. The tree was in full bloom, and a rosefinch flitted in and out of the tree. "Ah! What a beautiful sight! The red of the rosefinch seems to be so much brighter against the apricot blossoms!" thought Rigzin.

It was indeed a spectacular sight at this time of the year in the village of Ang. After the barren winter months, apricot trees spring to life laden with glorious showers of delicate pinkish-white flowers. Flaming red-coloured rosefinches migrate back to the mountains after disappearing to lower altitudes in winter.

Rigzin recalled his first glimpse of a rosefinch through a pair of binoculars, a glimpse that had taken his breath away! "This can't be true!" he had exclaimed to his camp instructor. Rigzin had signed up to attend a nature guides training course the previous summer, and they were on a field trip in the Markha valley. "It is," said the instructor smiling at Rigzin, "and we'll see more wonders of nature." And sure enough by the end of the course, Rigzin had not only learned a lot about the wildlife of Ladakh, he had also seen many mammals and birds for the first time.....ibex, pica, robin accentors and brown dippers, to name just a few.



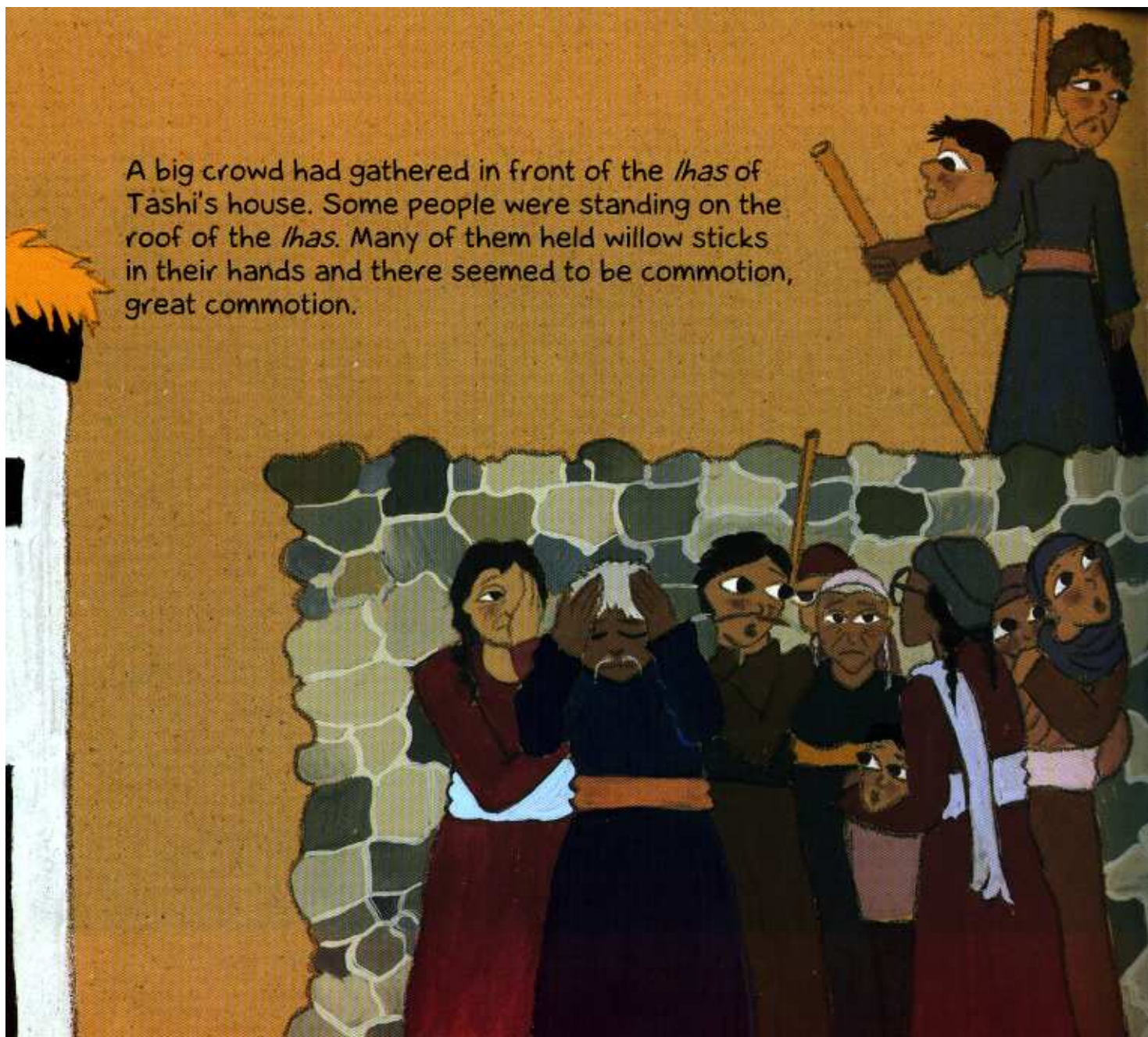


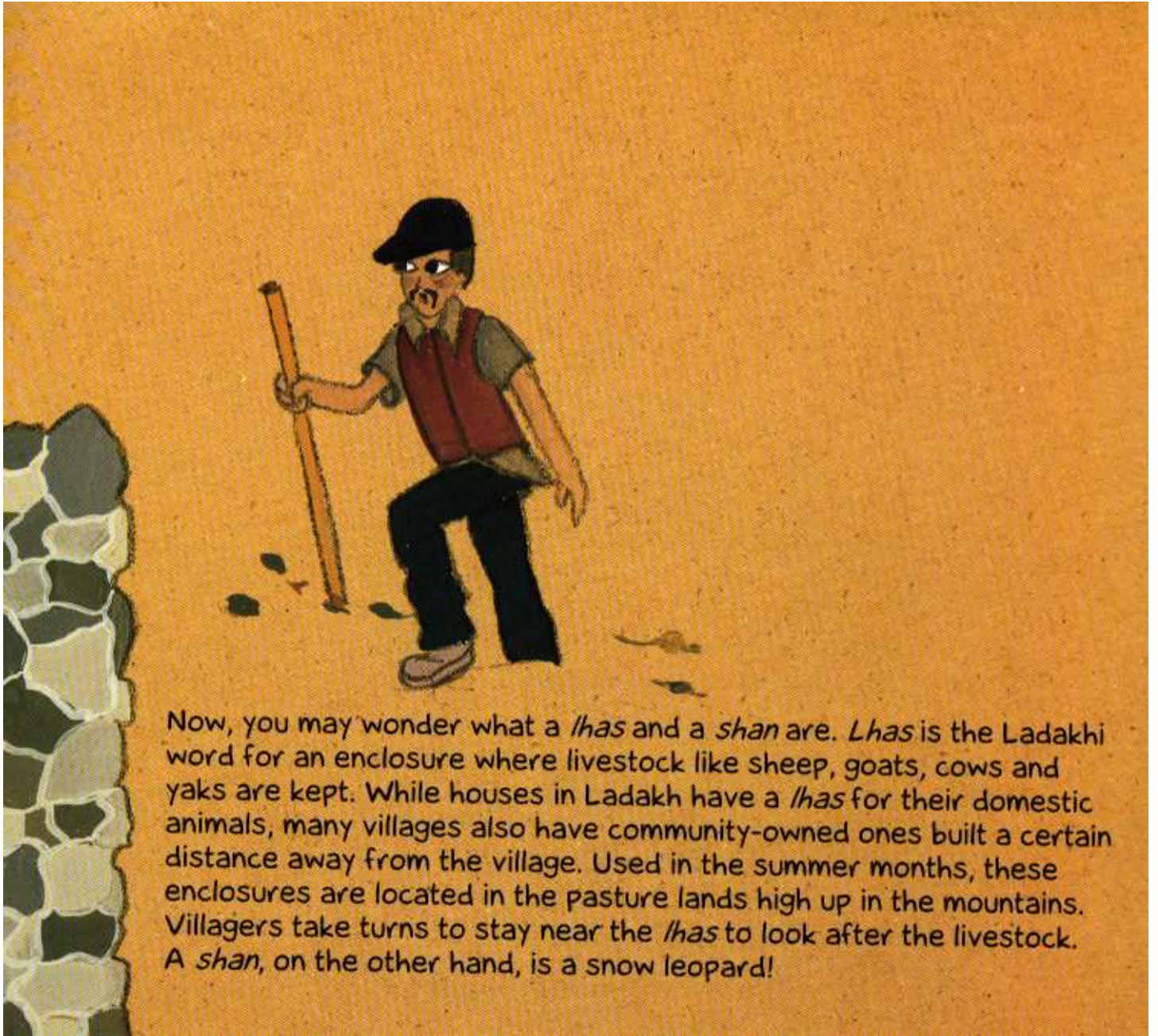
As Rigzin splashed the icy cold waters of the stream onto his face, he heard a voice in the distance call out to him, "Rigzin! Rigzin!" He looked up to find his friend Jigmet wildly gesticulating to him and pointing in the direction of Tashi's house. "Now why would Jigmet want me to go to Tashi's house? I have no time today," grumbled Rigzin, in a moment of irritation. But in the very next instant, he saw a group of people running towards Tashi's house shouting, "*Shan! Shan!*"

Rigzin's heart skipped a beat. "A *shan*? In Tashi's house? Impossible!" he thought. In a second he was up on his feet and running in the same direction. As he neared the house, he realized that something was amiss.



A big crowd had gathered in front of the /has of Tashi's house. Some people were standing on the roof of the /has. Many of them held willow sticks in their hands and there seemed to be commotion, great commotion.





Now, you may wonder what a */has* and a *shan* are. *Lhas* is the Ladakhi word for an enclosure where livestock like sheep, goats, cows and yaks are kept. While houses in Ladakh have a */has* for their domestic animals, many villages also have community-owned ones built a certain distance away from the village. Used in the summer months, these enclosures are located in the pasture lands high up in the mountains. Villagers take turns to stay near the */has* to look after the livestock. A *shan*, on the other hand, is a snow leopard!

"It's really big!"

"How many animals has it killed?"

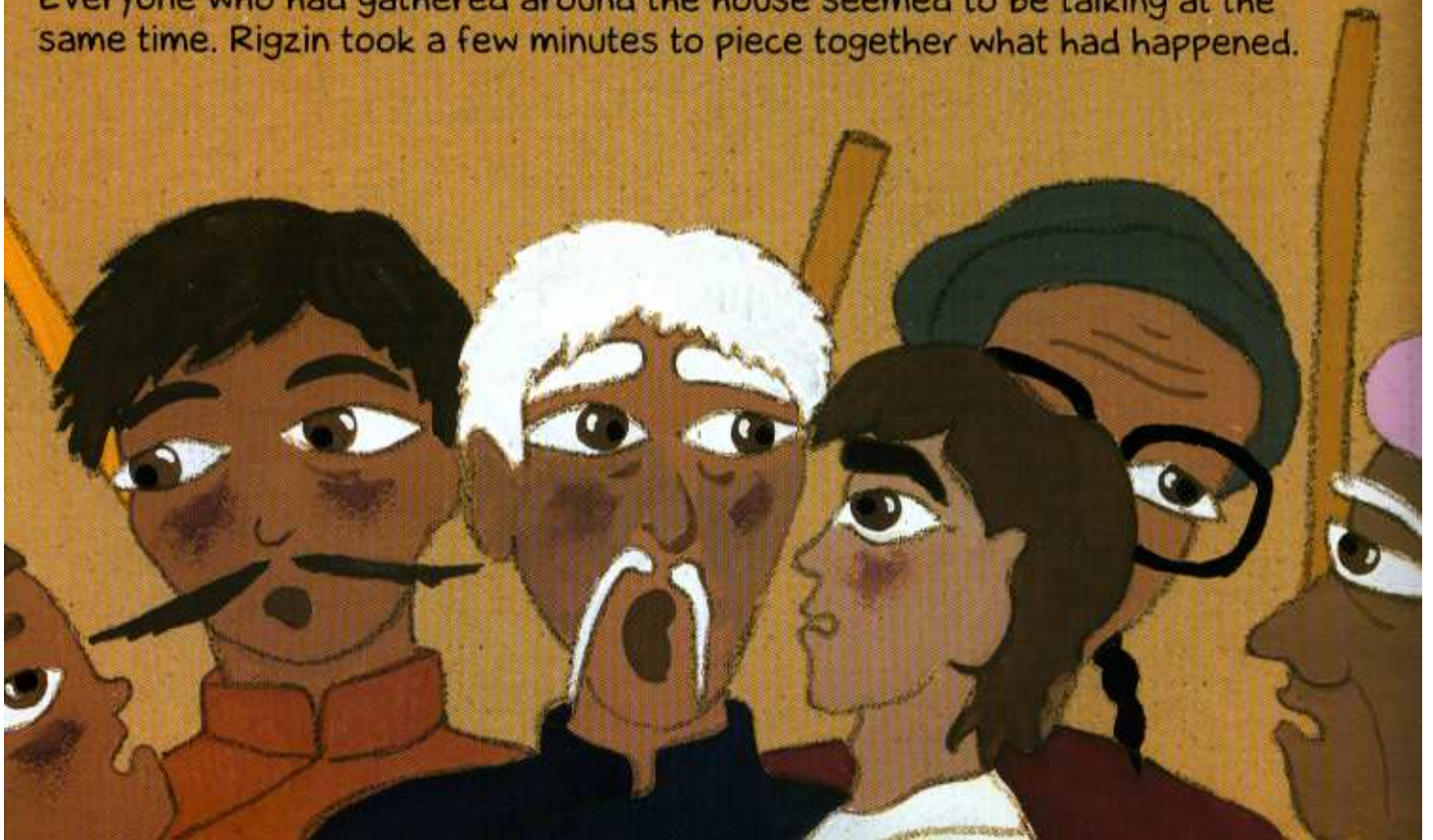
"I'm not sure, but quite a few I think."

"I believe one calf is still alive."

"Be careful, don't go too close."

"Angmo, Angmo! Go quickly to the village headman's house and tell him to come immediately."

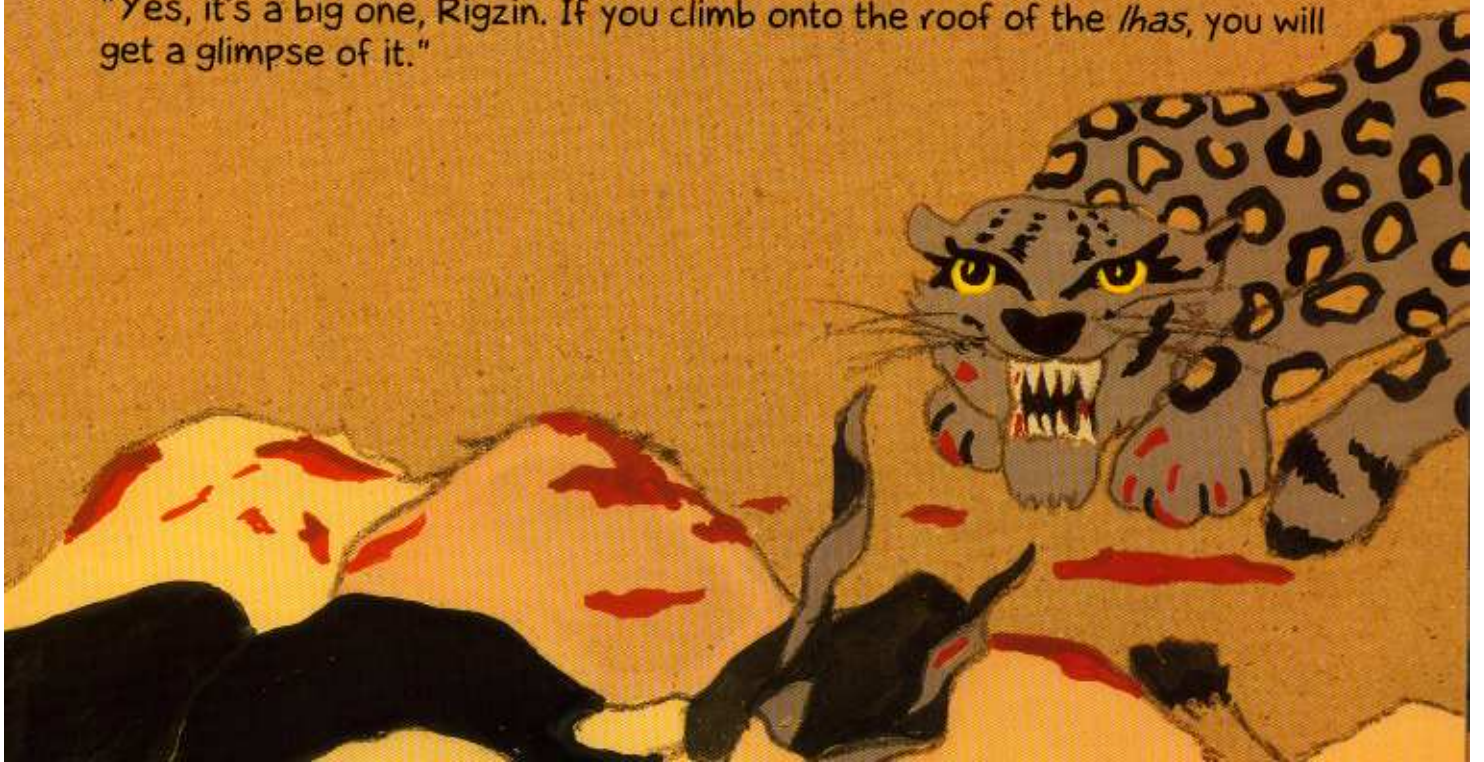
Everyone who had gathered around the house seemed to be talking at the same time. Rigzin took a few minutes to piece together what had happened.



Tashi's wife, Chorol, had woken up in the morning as usual. But as she went up to the roof to gather firewood to light the stove, she heard a low, growling sound. Running to the */has*, she opened the door. To her utter horror she saw a snow leopard crouching in a corner. There were blood stains covering the floor. All her goats and sheep lay motionless. They had all been killed by the leopard. Only a baby calf was untouched. She quickly shut the door, and ran back to her home to wake up her family.

"My God! I don't believe this!" said Rigzin to Jigmet, who had joined him at Tashi's house. "A *shan* in there?" he added, pointing to the door of the */has*.

"Yes, it's a big one, Rigzin. If you climb onto the roof of the */has*, you will get a glimpse of it."



Not wasting a second, Rigzin ran to the side of the house and climbed up to the roof. He had never seen a snow leopard before, but had learned a lot about these magnificent animals in the nature guides course. He was told that they were endangered animals and were protected by India's wildlife laws. He felt concerned when he heard that there were only about 500 snow leopards in the country, but also proud that his region was home to one of the most endangered big cats. He was fascinated by the way they communicated with one another through scents that they left on large overhanging rocks. "Keep away! This is my territory," was the message that males often left for each other. But the messages they left for females were totally different: "I'm young and handsome. Would you be interested in me?"

Snow leopards had unusually long tails, almost the length of their bodies. When told that leopards wrapped their tails around their bodies to keep warm in winter, Rigzin had exclaimed, "Just like we use shawls!"

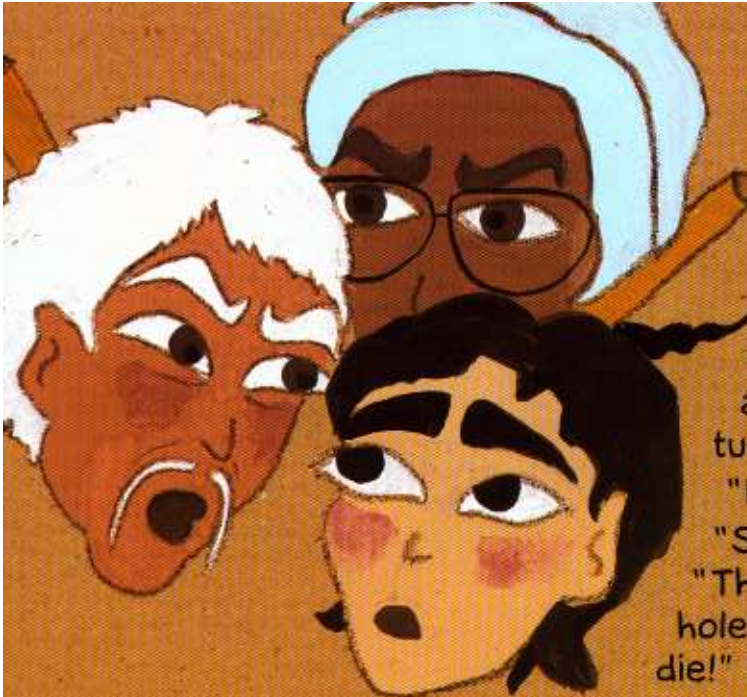




The people on the roof peered into a small hole that was on one side of the roof. Rigzin joined them and craned his neck to take a look. Yes, there it was, a real live snow leopard! Rigzin was numb, filled with a mixture of fear and excitement. This was an animal he thought he would never see. People referred to the snow leopard as the 'ghost of the mountains' because it camouflaged itself so well in the rocky land. Even though he could not get a full view of the creature in the *lhas*, he could tell by its size that it was a full-grown adult.

As Rigzin looked into the hole, he could see the baby calf lying still. It was the only animal in the *lhas* to have been spared. At least until now. The leopard was fairly close to the calf, but its attention was on the hole in the roof around which the crowd had gathered.





"Let's kill the leopard!" shouted Tashi suddenly, distraught at the loss of all his sheep and goats. "Yes! Yes! Kill the animal!" a loud chorus resounded. Rigzin turned around, and realized that the villagers who had gathered around Tashi's home had suddenly turned hostile.

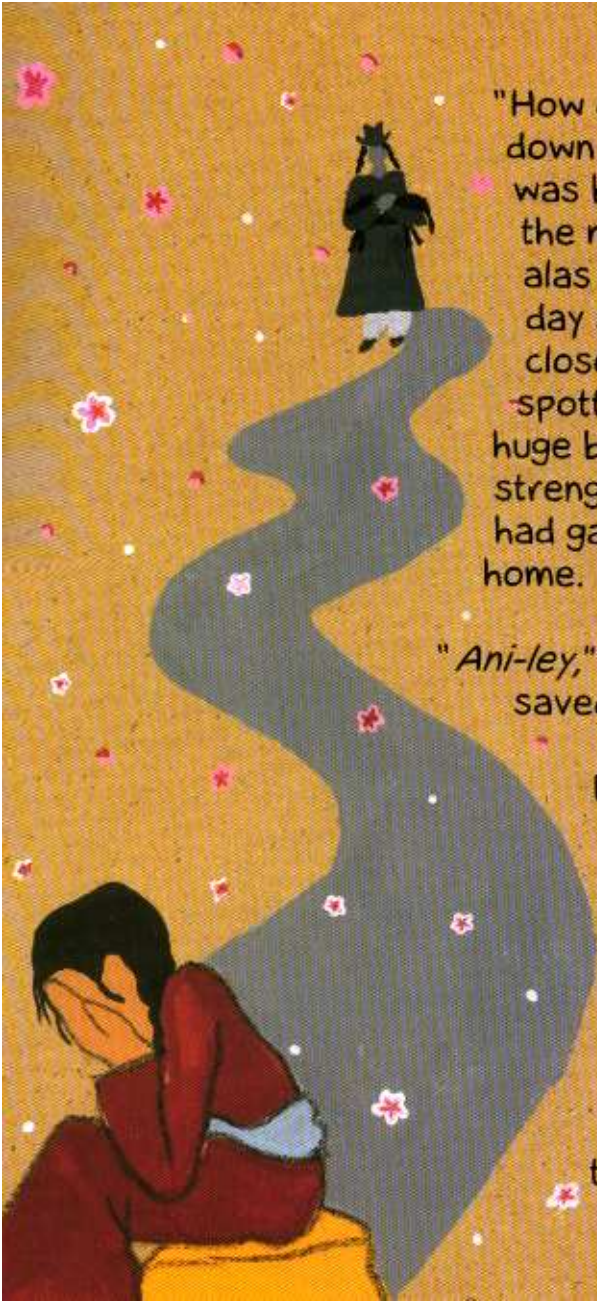
"How do we do it?" asked Tashi. "Stone it to death!" said one. "Throw poisoned meat through this hole! Let it eat the poisoned meat and die!" said another.

Rigzin froze with fear. "Quickly, think of something, think of something to save the leopard," he said to himself, as the voices grew louder, and more and more suggestions on how to kill the predator came pouring in.

"Hold it, hold it!" yelled Rigzin so loudly that everyone turned around to see who it was.

"We have to first save the calf in there. It's still alive, and we'll have to get it out somehow. If we threaten the leopard in anyway, it may attack the calf."





"How can we save the calf?" sobbed Chorol, breaking down as she remembered the time when the calf was born. Their cow had delivered while grazing in the mountains. It returned back to their home, but alas without its baby. Chorol had spent an entire day searching for the baby calf in the mountains close to Ang. Just as she was about to give up, she spotted it. The new born calf was lying close to a huge boulder, weak and shivering. It did not have the strength to follow its mother back to the village. She had gathered it in her arms and carried it back to her home.

"*Ani-ley*," replied Rigzin, "don't cry. Your calf will be saved. I have an idea. Let's distract the leopard...."

Before he could continue, the village headman, who had by now joined the group, taunted him. "Rigzin, are you planning to sing a lullaby to make it fall asleep?" Everyone laughed, despite the tension in the air.

"If I could hold a tune, I would sing *Azhang-ley*," replied Rigzin, relieved that at least the villagers' attention had moved away from thinking of ways to kill the animal.



"Listen to my idea. Right now the leopard is very near the calf on this side of the /has. You can see the calf through the hole lying near it, can't you? Let's make another small hole in the roof at the other end. All of you peep through the new hole and make a noise. The leopard will find that disturbing and is bound to cross over to see what you are up to. While you distract it from up here, I will quickly enter the /has and retrieve the calf."

"You are crazy!" laughed the village headman, and everyone nodded in agreement. Well, almost everyone. Not Chorol. She ran up to Rigzin, and with tears in her eyes pleaded, "It's not safe for you to enter a /has with a leopard inside. But can you think of any other way to save my poor baby?"

"A snow leopard has never attacked humans till now. In all the countries where it is found, there has not been even one recorded instance of an attack. Don't worry, I am quite sure that I will be okay."

Saying that, Rigzin picked up a stick and started pounding the roof at the other end. Everyone joined him and soon a small hole was made. Sure enough, this seemed to anger the leopard. It came over to this end of the /has and initially stood still, keeping an eye on the roof. Then when everyone on the roof started to yell and scream, it began to jump towards the hole. But the roof was too high, and the leopard could not even touch it with its front paws.

Not wasting another moment, Rigzin ran down to the /has. "Keep calm," he told himself as he placed his hand on the door of the /has. He took a deep breath and opened it. He tip-toed quickly up to the calf and picked it up. As he stepped back, he saw the leopard turn around. The leopard had spotted him! Rigzin bolted towards the door. As he quickly shut it, he saw a flash of grey through the narrow chink. The snow leopard had missed him by a fraction of a second!

Outside the /has, Rigzin sank to his knees holding the calf in his arms. In seconds, the villagers joined him from atop the roof.

"He's alive! He's safe!" yelled one.

"He has saved the calf!" shouted another.

"The calf is still breathing. Angmo, take it inside your house and give it some milk. It must be still very scared after this horrible incident," advised a third.

"Oh, Rigzin. I was so scared for you," confessed Jigmet, sitting down next to him.



Rigzin handed over the calf to Angmo. Tashi and Chorol came up to him and clasped his hands tightly. The villagers gathered around him and patted him on his back. It was their way of thanking Rigzin for what he had just done.

"Now what do we do with the snow leopard?" asked a villager, once the excitement of saving the calf had died down. "Kill it, of course!" said Tashi. "Oh no! We can't kill a snow leopard, *azhang-ley*" responded Rigzin, jumping up to his feet.

"Why not?" asked a villager. "A leopard killed my yak last year."

"And I lost two sheep," said another.

"I lost four rams three years ago," said a third.

"The fewer snow leopards we have around, the safer are our livestock."

"Yes, let's kill it!"

"Kill it! Kill it!" shouted a chorus of voices.



"But who is to know that we have killed one?" queried someone in the crowd. "The wildlife officials are far away in Leh, and if we keep quiet about it, no one will come to know."

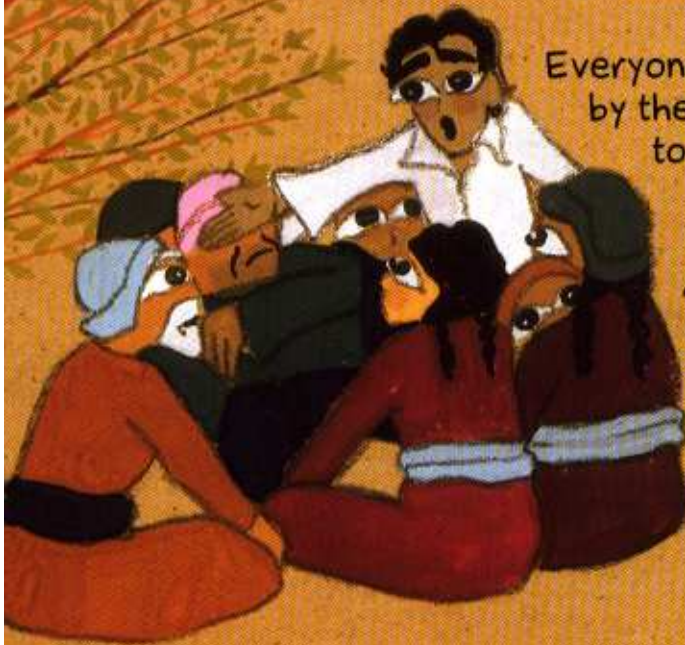
"I won't keep quiet about it," threatened Rigzin, anger permeating his eyes and voice. "If this animal is killed, I will report all of you to the wildlife department."

"Don't you dare talk to us like that! You are half our age, remember!" yelled Tashi.

At that moment the headman stepped in, fearing an endless battle of words. "Calm down, everyone. Let's sit down and discuss what we should do," he said.

Everyone settled down under the willow trees by the side of Tashi's house. Jigmet sat next to Rigzin, fearing again for his friend.

"There is nothing to discuss, *azhang-ley*," began Rigzin. "The animal is an endangered one. There are only about 5000 snow leopards left in the world. Some of these animals are being killed by angry villagers who have lost their livestock. Many are killed for their fur and bones."



"Yes, that's true," chipped in Angmo, who had joined the group after feeding the calf some milk. "I heard this on the radio one evening. A poacher was recently caught with over 100 animal skins, and the news said that many of the skins were those of snow leopards."

"One person with a 100 skins?" quipped a villager, his eyes growing wide with astonishment.

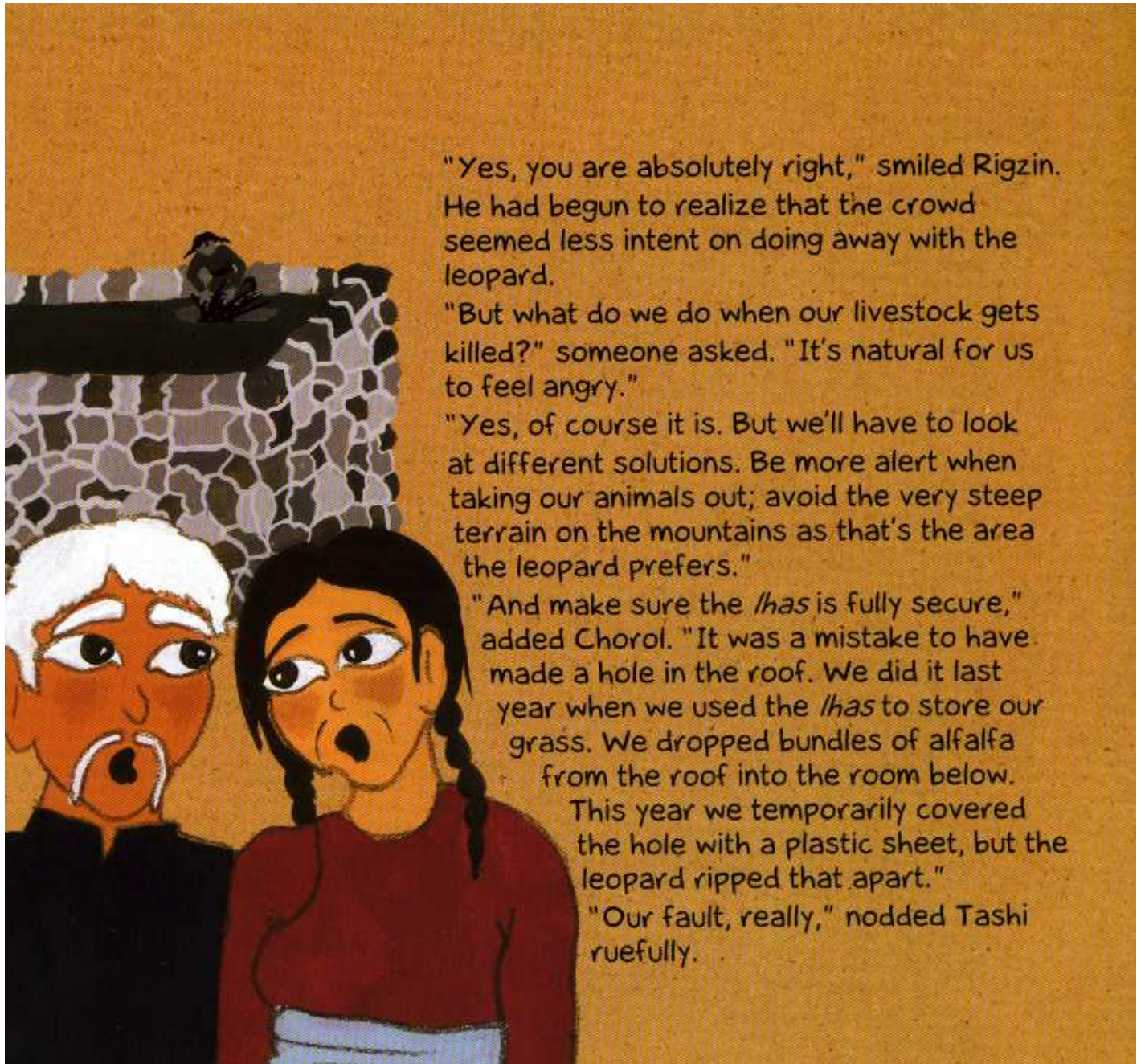
"Yes, the poaching of endangered animals is a serious issue. Luckily, it is not a problem in Ladakh. Otherwise it would be something to be very ashamed of. Besides the leopard, many animals like the otter, tiger, and the red fox are poached for their skin. A tiger skin fetches the poacher thousands of rupees."

"But there are no tigers in Ladakh," added Angmo.

"Yes, that's true," responded Rigzin. "Tiger bones have been used in traditional Chinese medicine. Now that the numbers of tigers are on the decline, the bones of snow leopards are being used as a substitute. If this continues, then the snow leopard may become extinct in our country. Our children and grandchildren will only see their pictures."

"And hear stories about them," added Chorol.





"Yes, you are absolutely right," smiled Rigzin. He had begun to realize that the crowd seemed less intent on doing away with the leopard.

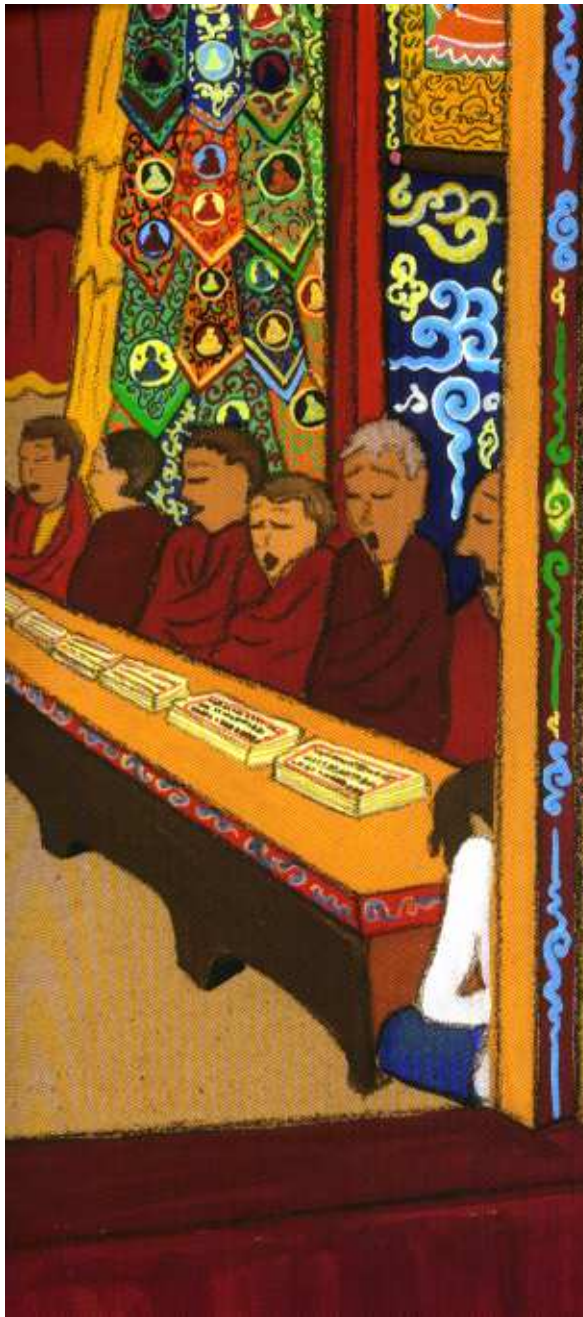
"But what do we do when our livestock gets killed?" someone asked. "It's natural for us to feel angry."

"Yes, of course it is. But we'll have to look at different solutions. Be more alert when taking our animals out; avoid the very steep terrain on the mountains as that's the area the leopard prefers."

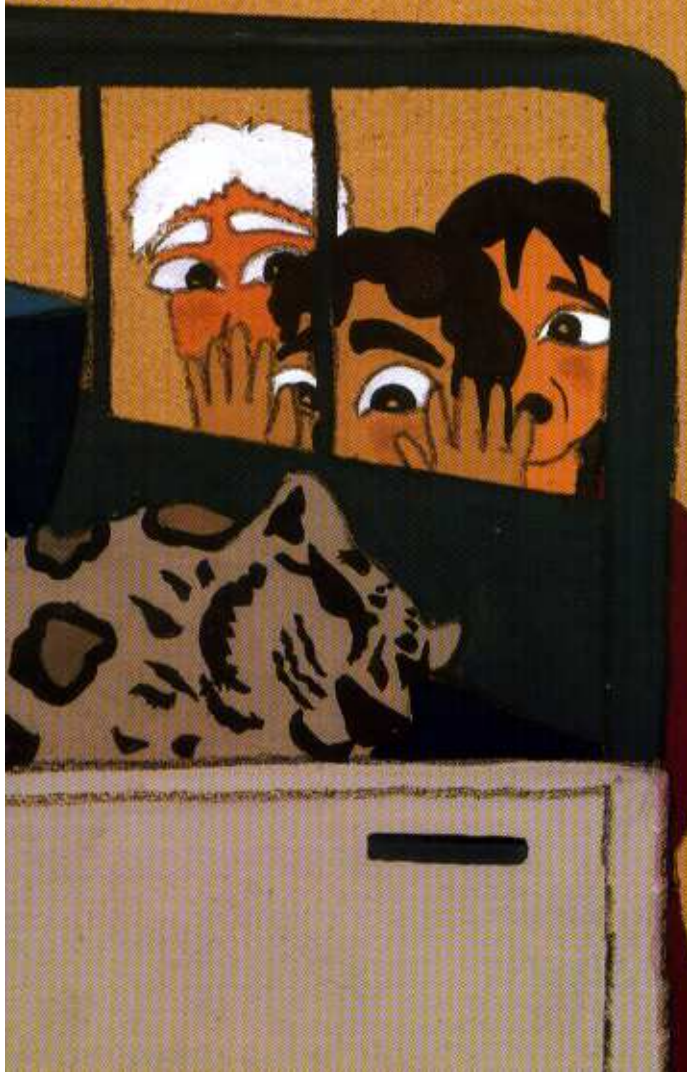
"And make sure the *lhas* is fully secure," added Chorol. "It was a mistake to have made a hole in the roof. We did it last year when we used the *lhas* to store our grass. We dropped bundles of alfalfa from the roof into the room below.

This year we temporarily covered the hole with a plastic sheet, but the leopard ripped that apart."

"Our fault, really," nodded Tashi ruefully.



Later that night, Rigzin sat down in a corner of one of the temples in the monastery to pray. It had been an eventful day. Once he had convinced the villagers to not kill the leopard, he informed the Wildlife Department at Leh about the predator. Three officials and a veterinary doctor arrived later that afternoon in a jeep. The entire village gathered once more at Tashi's house to watch the proceedings.



The doctor shot a tranquillizer into the leopard, which was no easy task as it had to be done through the hole in the roof. When the officials and Rigzin carried the animal out, there was a collective gasp. No one had seen a leopard from so close. The animal was placed on a sack cloth in the jeep and was taken to Leh. A decision about where to release it would be taken the next day.

At the monastery, the Buddhist monks started their chants in unison. The fragrance of juniper incense filled the air. Through the windows of the temple, the moon beams spread a silvery light, almost ghost-like. "Just like the ghost of our mountains," thought Rigzin, as he closed his eyes, smiling. He knew that somewhere in their beautiful mountains, a snow leopard would soon walk free.



Ladakhi words used in the story

ama-ley: mother



gonpa: Buddhist monastery



shan: snow leopard



lhas: an enclosure where domestic livestock are kept



ani-ley: aunt; a respectful term for an older woman



azhang-ley: term used with respect for an elderly man



The residents of Ang, a small village in the Himalayan mountains in Ladakh, wake up one morning to find an unusual visitor in their midst. The villagers are angry, very angry, and threaten to kill the visitor. A young lad of the village is the only one who feels that the visitor must be spared. What can he possibly do? Read on to find out.....



Kalpavriksh

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